Roger M

The Return Of Rock's High Fly

by Danny McCue

Before The Byrds, even the geniuses of American pop cast their music as purely as a boyfriend/girlfriend proposition. Brian Wilson still had his most ambitious work ahead of him. Phil Spector's wall-of-sound was quickly becoming a thing of the past.

What The Byrds did—with an original line-up that included Roger McGuinn, Gene Clark, David Crosby, Chris Hillman and Mike Clarke, was re-invigorate both the body and mind of stateside rock and roll in the face of a chart-climbing onslaught from Britain. Beginning in 1964, when their electrified cover of Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" ushered in the era of folk-rock, through to the early '70's, they were the kind of band from whom even personnel changes were seen by other groups as cues to explore different avenues of sound.

Credited with radically reshaping the so-called 'California Sound,' The Byrds, and particularly Roger McGuinn, continued to experiment with both jazz and country influences, Dylan-esque folk, even Indian ragas. "Eight Miles High," written by McGuinn during an amphetamine experience, was the first single to be banned by radio programmers because of its 'psychedelic' overtones. The band's lasting influence is reflected in the '70's sounds of The Eagles, such '80's bands as REM, and of course, in the work of Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers.

Though he continued to record both as a solo artist and with former Byrds Gene Clark and Chris Hillman during the '70's, the period following the high-flying '60's has been a relatively quiet one for McGuinn. He spent the '80's writing, often with his wife/manager Camilla, and playing smaller venues, such as Manhattan's Bottom Line, but neglected to put out a single album.

Thus far, the '90's have been an entirely different matter. First there was the Columbia/Legacy Records release of *The Byrds Box*, a massive retrospective of the band's work; then The Byrds' induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

But perhaps the most meaningful occurrence was the late January release of Roger McGuinn's first solo album is several years, *Back From Rio*. When we spoke to the Clearwater, Florida resident shortly before its release, he seemed happy to have a new album, but loathed to characterize its chances for chart success. He needn't be the latter. A highly energetic and tuneful effort, *Back From Rio* recaptures the fresh-faced enthusiasm that went into the making of the very first Byrds album, and while the sound is clearly McGuinn's, 12-string Rickenbacker and all, the tone of the album is such that it acknowledges the artist's creative past without embalming it. Among McGuinn's friends who appear either on the tracks or in the songwriting credits are Elvis Costello, Michael Penn, Dave Stewart (of the Eurythmics), former Byrds David Crosby and Chris Hillman, and former Eagle Timothy Schmidt. The first single from the album, co-written and performed with Tom Petty, is called "King Of The Hill."

Although you've continued to be very active on the road over the past decade, this is your first album since 1980. Why'd you stay out of the studio for so long?

I just wasn't really that interested. The trends were going in the direction of synthesizer music and stuff like that, which wasn't the stuff that I did, so I just didn't really bother with it until the opportunity to do this album kind of fell into my lap. I was on a Crowded House tour and we did some songs together that got on a Crowded House single, a cassette single, and some of the record companies heard that and decided that a Roger McGuinn album might be a good thing to do now.

Did it take any arm twisting on the record company's part to get you to do it?

No. It was just a real natural thing that happened. I think it was just a question of, you know, how the music business goes around in big cycles. The kind of music that I have continued to do over the years has come back around again.

When listening to Back From Rio, *one of the things I respond to is the album's energy. Did you feel particularly energetic or spunky while you were recording it?*

Yeah, I did. I really felt a lot of enthusiasm, not only from me, but from Tom Petty and Elvis Costello and Chris [Hillman] and David Crosby and Michael Penn. I really felt that there was a lot of good feeling in the studio while we cut it.

How did Elvis Costello become involved with this project?

I've known him for about four years. We met in New Orleans when he came to a gig that I was doing and then came backstage. We started playing guitars and talking and gradually what happened was, I'd bump into him in airports; we'd be playing in the same city and we'd see each other. Eventually, I asked him if he had any material and he said no, but he'd write me a song. I said, OK, great. Then I was changing planes in Atlanta awhile back, he was getting on the plane I'd just gotten off ; and I ran into him and asked, 'have you finished my song yet?' He said, 'Oh no...' So he went back home to Ireland and he wrote it and sent it over to me with a three-page letter explaining what the song was about and how I was to sing it [laughs]. When I put the song down [on tape] I asked him to come down and sing harmony on it. He happened to be in town doing his album while I was doing mine.

How would you say your relationship with Tom Petty has matured over the years?

Well, I've known Tom since 1975, when we both recorded "American Girl." I heard his version and thought, 'Wow, that's a great song,' and I did it on my album, *Thunderbyrd*. Then he and I went on tour together and we sang it together, live on stage. Over the years since, every time I'm in the same town he's in, I'll go to see him. We fly kites on the beach, and I'd get up on the stage with him and jam. I went on the Dylan/Petty tour with him in 1987. That's when we wrote the song "King Of The Hill," which is on this album. We've been just real good friends over the years.

As a songwriter are you more comfortable as a lyricist or as a composer?

I'm learning to be a better lyricist. I've always primarily been the music writer. When I was writing songs with Jacque Levy, he was the lyricist and I was the music writer, although I would kick in a few words here and there. But I'd say I'm really starting to be a stronger lyricist than I have been.

As a songwriter, do you feel that there are certain specific themes that can bear being returned to again and again?

The love theme can always be repeated, because it's something that's a constant in people's lives. Either they have it or they don't. Then the ecological situation of the earth is something that's very important to me and that's what "The Trees Are All Gone" is about. I don't know if you've seen the artwork for the album yet, but the cover is, like, a shot of the planet with simulated fire in the rain forest area of Brazil.

You have a lot of co-writers on this album. What makes them compatible with you and you compatible with them?

I'm pretty good about writing with people. I can write with almost anybody and I really enjoy writing with other people, because you get to bounce ideas around and they sort of check you if you start to go off on a tangent. They'll say, 'Nah, nah, let's keep it in focus.' And you can do the same thing with them. It also speeds up the process of writing. I find it a much more enjoyable process with another writer.

How regimented a creative person are you? Do you practice guitar regularly—sit down to write at a certain time of day?

I've tried that, but found it almost counter-productive. I try to wait until the muse hits me, though it's sometimes a long time between sessions. As far as guitar practice is concerned, yeah, I try to keep my guitar chops up. You have to do that or else you lose your callouses and you don't know how to play anymore. So I sit down with the guitar at least every couple of days and play it for awhile. As far as writing, I'm not a nine-to-fiver. I used to do that when I worked with Bobby Darin in the Brill Building. I was a staff writer for his publishing company, which meant I would show up at ten in the morning and stay till six at night and write songs. I didn't write very many songs there though; it was a tough grind. I've never wanted to do that again, so I just kind of write when the spirit hits me.

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Can you write on demand?

If I'm pressured to. If someone says, 'write a song for a movie,' I can look at the script and come up with a song for it. Whether it's a great song or not is up in the air. It could happen either way. Actually "Someone To Love" was one of those songs. Camilla, my wife, and I wrote that for a movie—I don't want to tell you which one, because it's embarrassing.

How loose were you in the studio after being away from it for so long?

I think it was pretty tight in the studio. We were very clear about what we were going to do. We did a lot of pre-production, worked out all the arrangements, the tempos and everything before we went in. And then I wrote up the lead sheets for the different instruments and got everything in about three or four takes. So it wasn't like a wild, free flowing experience.

Back when you started making records, they were usually done very quickly. I know I'm being presumptuous, but it seems to me a lot was left to intuition. At any time during your career, did you ever question yourself or your talent if things didn't come as easily as they did then?

I've never thought about it like that. I've experienced writer's block, you know, but it always goes away and you come back and write some more songs.

Do you have to do anything to make it [writer's block] go away?

You just have to wait. Trying to make it go away

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makes it worse. It's like the chinese finger puzzle: the harder you pull on it, the tighter it gets.

Who works out the harmonies on your records?

When David Crosby is around, he does. He's a master at harmonies. He can really come up with great harmony parts. That's what happened on the 1990 session we did for *The Byrds Box*.

Once you arrived at the point where you said to yourself, 'I am a musician,' were you certain you'd make it, or did you just hope you would?

Yeah, I always did think I would make it [laughs].

How much of a surprise was it for you when Dylan joined you on stage during "Mr. Tambourine Man" at last year's Roy Orbison Tribute concert?

I knew he was coming. I had talked to him on the phone from his house in Malibu hours before the show and we had worked out what microphone he would get on and what verse he would sing—and of course, when

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he showed up it was completely different. He walked over to Crosby's mic and started singing the wrong verse and everything [laughs], but you know, it worked out great. It wasn't really the wrong verse, it was just that he started singing in a place I didn't expect him too.

Were you at all influenced in the timing of making your new album by the success of say, your friends in The Traveling Wilburys?

It's nice to see that kind of music is popular again, because for a time it wasn't. Yeah, it feels like I kind of fit into that category. I feel good about that.

While acting as a consultant for Columbia when they put together The Byrds Box, *did you have any problem with the fact that everybody sees a story differently? I mean, did you ever ask yourself whether you were supervising the telling of Roger McGuinn's story of The Byrds, or the overall story?*

Well, because I was with The Byrds for the whole time, basically my story is the overall story. The way I see it anyway.

Did being the consultant on that project cause you to re-evaluate The Byrds?

I guess it does bring The Byrds more to the forefront. People are more interested in The Byrds and I'm getting more fan mail and stuff about The Byrds. But it's always been there. In my shows I've always done The Byrds' hits because people want to hear them. I've never really forgotten about The Byrds.

To this day, The Byrds get a kind of unique response. Recently I was talking to an editor friend of mine who at the mention of The Byrds referred to you guys as 'the American Beatles.'

I don't care for that term. In fact, I think there was a group called The American Beatles [laughs].

Really?

Yeah, back in the '60's. They spelled it a little differently, but that's a funny name for a group. I think there was a Japanese Beatles, too [laughs]. ❐